



KING JAMES

notes taken from Tracy Bormon, author of *Witches: James I and the English Witch Hunts*

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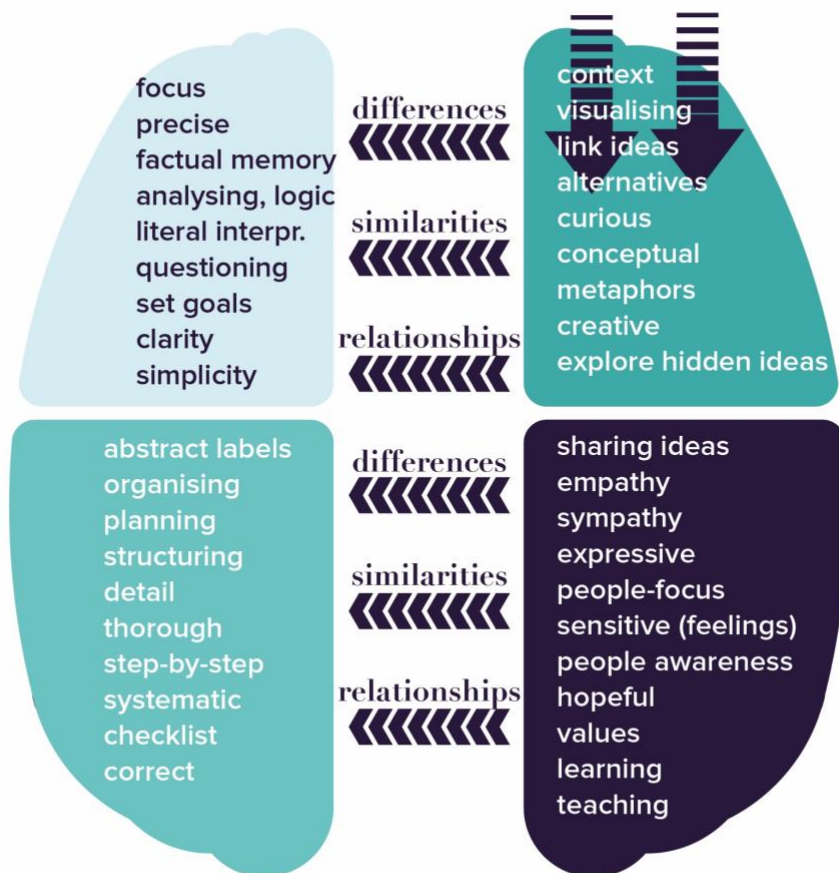
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A

**stored
information**

B



D

**new
information**

C

RIGHT-BRAIN QUESTIONS FOR THINKING ABOUT CONTEXT

Whenever you read about context, you should try to ask the following questions

- Is this similar to something in the text(s) I'm reading?
 - What is it similar to?
 - Themes
 - Ideas
 - Characters
 - Symbols
 - Scenes
 - Incidents
 - Etc.
 - What's the relationship between the context and my text?



- In what way(s) is it similar?
- Why might the author have made that connection?

TEXT COLOUR CODE

- Background information
- Important information that links to text
- Examples

WHY WAS JAMES SO PREOCCUPIED WITH WITCHCRAFT?

The year 1590 witnessed the largest and most high-profile witch trials in Scottish history

- No fewer than 70 suspects were rounded up in North Berwick, on suspicion of raising a storm to destroy Anne's ship on her first attempt to come to Scotland and again when King James's fleet conveyed his new bride, Anne of Denmark, across the North Sea.
- Convinced the tempests that had almost cost their lives had been summoned by witchcraft, James was intent upon bringing the perpetrators to justice.
- Most of the suspects soon confessed – under torture – to concocting a host of bizarre and gruesome spells and rituals in order to whip up the storm.
 - These included binding the severed body parts of a dead man to the legs of a cat, then tossing the bundle into the waves, whereupon "there did arise such a tempest in the sea, as a greater hath not been seen".
 - James was so appalled when he heard such tales that he decided to personally superintend the interrogations.
 - He had one of the main suspects, Agnes Sampson, brought to Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh so that he could question her himself.
 - When she "stood stiffly in denial" of the charges against her, she "had all her hair shaved off ... and her head thrawn [wrenched] with a rope according to the custom of that country, being a pain most grievous".
 - All of this continued for an hour, while the king looked on with "great delight".
 - Eventually, he was so convinced by her recount of a private conversation he had had with his wife that:
 - "The king's majesty wondered greatly, and swore by the living God, that he believed all the devils in hell could not have discovered the same, acknowledging her words to be most true, and therefore gave the more credit to the rest that is before declared."
 - From that moment, his interest in witchcraft deepened into a dangerous obsession.
 - He also claimed that the death (by execution) of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots in 1567, was 'visible in Scotland before it did really happen'
 - He then set about intensifying popular fear of witches with the *Newes from Scotland* pamphlet





and *Daemonologie*, a painstaking and meticulous piece of work that must have taken James years to complete

WHY DID JAMES WRITE *DAEMONOLOGIE*?

In James's publication, *Daemonologie*, 1597, his 'Preface To The Reader' lays out his purpose for the book:

- 'The fearful aboundinge at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaues of the Deuill, the Witches or enchaunters, hath moved me (beloued reader) to dispatch in post, this following treatise of mine, not in any wise (as I protest) to serue for a shew of my learning & ingine, but onely (mooued of conscience) to preasse thereby, so farre as I can, **to resolute the doubting harts of many**; both that such assaultes of Sathan are most certainly practiced, & that the instrumentes thereof, merits most severely to be punished: against the damnable opinions of two principally in our age, wherof the one called **SCOT an Englishman, is not ashamed in publike print to deny, that ther can be such a thing as Witch-craft**: and so mainteines the old error of the Sadducees, [xii] in denying of spirits.'
- The witch-hunts that swept across Europe from 1450 to 1750 were among the most controversial and terrifying phenomena in history
- They resulted in the trial of around 100,000 people (most of them women), a little under half of whom were put to death
- One of the most active centres of witch-hunting was Scotland
 - perhaps 4,000 people were consigned to the flames
 - a striking number for such a small country
 - and more than double the execution rate in England
 - The ferocity of these persecutions can be attributed to the most notorious royal witch-hunter: King James VI of Scotland
 - However, when Elizabeth I of England died in 1603 without any direct heirs, the Scottish King was named her successor
 - He found his new subjects to be a good deal more ambivalent than their northern neighbours (and, indeed, the rest of Europe) on the subject of witchcraft.
 - Executions had declined in England and there was growing skepticism about the existence of witches
 - He then set about determined to convince the public that witchcraft was real and to drown out the few dissenting voices such as Reginald Scot, who tried to disprove the existence of witches with his book, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* in 1584
- The purpose of *Daemonologie* wasn't only to convince the doubters of the existence of witchcraft
 - it was also to inspire those who persecuted witches to do so with new vigour and determination.
 - James described witchcraft as "high treason against God", which meant that all manner of horrors were justified in wringing confessions from the accused.
 - Though lacking in original or profound ideas, the fact that it had been written by a king made it enormously influential.
 - It is no coincidence that cases of witchcraft in his kingdom multiplied at an alarming rate thereafter.





- James's subjects were not unusually credulous, however. In persuading them of the evils of witchcraft he was, to a large extent, pushing on an open door.
 - Such beliefs had been an integral part of society for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.
 - Until the Enlightenment of the 18th century, and even beyond, the Kingdom of Darkness seemed as real as the Kingdom of Heaven, and ordinary people everywhere believed in devils, imps, fairies, goblins and ghosts, as well as other legendary creatures such as vampires, werewolves and unicorns.
 - Everyone feared evil portents – a hare crossing one's path, for example, or a picture falling from the wall. A pregnant woman would avoid gazing at the moon for fear that it could render her baby insane.
 - In one of his tracts on witchcraft, Puritan preacher George Gifford described a number of signs that were believed to augur evil – from salt spilt at a banquet to the sudden onset of a nosebleed.

JAMES'S BELIEFS ABOUT WOMEN

James's beliefs had a dangerously misogynistic core.

- He grew up to scorn – even revile – women.
 - Though he was by no means alone in his view of the natural weakness and inferiority of women, his aversion towards them was unusually intense.
 - He took every opportunity to propound the view that they were far more likely than men to succumb to witchcraft.
 - “As that sex is frailer than man is, so is it easier to be entrapped in these gross snares of the Devil,” he argued in *Daemonologie*, “as was overwell proved to be true by the Serpent's deceiving of Eve at the beginning which makes him the friendlier with that sex since then.”
 - He would later commission a new version of the Bible in which all references to witches were rewritten in the female gender.
 - Notice the similarities with Shakespeare's portrayal of Lady Macbeth who appears to manipulate Macbeth into killing Duncan and who calls on the ‘spirits’ to ‘unsex me here’ and with her instruction to her husband to ‘act like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under’t’
 - Shakespeare clearly aligns her with the devil and this appears to be an allusion, not only to the Bible but to James's own beliefs that women were ‘friendlier’ with the devil more easily than men.

1606 – SHAKESPEARE FOCUSES ON ROYAL INTERESTS

The year 1606 was a turbulent one in early modern England.

- Three years previously James VI of Scotland had succeeded Elizabeth I on the English throne.
 - One of his first actions was to take up the patronage of Shakespeare's acting company, who became the King's Men.
 - As chief dramatist of the King's Men, Shakespeare turned his drama towards royal interests.
 - Many plays of the early seventeenth century engage with political themes close to James





- the issue of the division of the kingdoms in King Lear, for instance, addresses his ambition to unify his kingdoms of England and Scotland with reference to the ancient kingdom of Britain
 - but not only does the play take up Scottish themes, it also engages with James' own claim to be descended from the historical Banquo
 - In the process it exonerates from blame the character inherited from the chronicle sources, which state that Banquo was privy to the murder of Duncan

OTHER PLAYS INSPIRED BY WITCHES

James's new subjects were eager to curry favour with him by echoing his hatred of witches.

- In the same year that the new Witchcraft Act was passed, Christopher Marlowe's dark morality play, *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, was published.
 - This had first been performed in around 1588, five years before the playwright's death, and was one of the most shocking portrayals of witchcraft ever to be performed.
 - Audiences were so aghast at the horrors that unfolded before them on stage that some claimed to have been driven mad by it, and on occasion real devils were said to have appeared on stage, "to the great amazement of both the actors and spectators".
 - As well as terrifying people into avoiding any dabbling with necromancy, the play also intensified their hatred and fear of witches.
 - It can have been no coincidence that it was published in the very year that James I began his crusade against witchcraft in England.

Other playwrights were quick to follow suit.

- Ben Jonson devised a number of masques for the entertainment of the king and his court.
 - The 'antimasque' to his *Masque of Queens* included the presentation of a group of witches who represented "the opposites to good fame".
 - The playwright had clearly done a great deal of research, for he referenced a range of current and classical demonological works as his sources.
 - He set out detailed instructions for the staging of the antimasque, describing the entering on stage of 11 witches "some with rats on their head; some on their shoulders; others with ointment pots at their girdles; all... making a confused noise, with strange gestures".
 - One of their number was "naked armed, bare-footed, her frock tucked, her hair knotted, and folded with vipers; in her hand a torch made of a dead man's arm, lighted; girded with a snake".

DID SHAKESPEARE WRITE 'MACBETH' TO PLEASE JAMES?

The most famous of all the literary works inspired by witchcraft, winning widespread acclaim in its day and ever since, was Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.





- Deliberately short in length (James was known to have little patience for sitting through long plays), it is significant that the occasion of its inaugural performance was a visit by Queen Anne's brother, the king of Denmark, in 1606, given that it was James's voyage to his wife's native land that had prompted his obsession with witchcraft.
 - Shakespeare wove in several references to this voyage in the play,
 - such as when the First Witch claims that she set sail in a sieve, just as one of the North Berwick witches was accused of doing.
 - The line "Though his bark cannot be lost/Yet it shall be tempest-tossed" almost certainly alluded to James's near-death experience in 1589.
 - All the leaders of the English judiciary would have been present at this important state occasion, and this was exactly the sort of play that would inspire within them the same witch-hunting fervour as their royal master.
 - It should be noted, however, that recent scholars point out that there is no evidence that the play was ever performed before King James and that Banquo is not so whitewashed as James might have wanted:
 - Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature Gives way to in repose! (2.1)

WITCHCRAFT – A CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE STATE

The drama centres around Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who murder King Duncan to seize the throne of Scotland after three witches prophesied Macbeth's succession.

- Whether the witches thus caused the overthrow of the natural succession or merely brought out Macbeth's inherent evil is left to the audience's imagination.
 - Either way, the play both confirmed and introduced new elements to the stereotypical view of a witch, with her spells, familiars and inherent evil. It also spawned two of the most-quoted lines in English literary history:
 - "Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble."
 - *Macbeth* instilled fear among those watching that witchcraft was not just a satanic confederacy, but a conspiracy against the state.
 - The latter notion was all too readily accepted in England at this time because the play was performed just a few months after one of the most notorious conspiracies in history: the gunpowder plot.
 - Within the space of three short years, England had been catapulted from the 'golden age' of the Virgin Queen into one of the darkest and most dangerous periods of its history.

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